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Detroit District

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Before tulips bloom – ships sail through the locks

DETROIT -- A definite sign of spring -- The Soo Locks in Sault Ste. Marie Mich., opened March 25 at 12:01 a.m. after a safe and successful winter maintenance season. During winter maintenance crews dewatered the locks and made repairs to three gates in time for the shipping season to begin.

The ROGER BLOUGH led the pack of ships locking through the system by moving down-bound at 1:15 p.m., March 26. Four others soon followed after the Coast Guard cutter MACKINAW broke-up the ice in the channel.

On its way to plow through the icy waters of Lake Superior, the tug JOSEPH H. THOMPSON JR. was the first ship up-bound at 9:04 p.m., March 27.

The Soo locks afford the only passageway for ships 1,000 feet long, 104 feet wide, with drafts of up to 28 feet to navigate safely from Lake Superior through the St. Mary's River down to the lower Great Lakes.

These Locks represent the "key" to the vast iron ore ranges of the upper Midwest, and have been a leading factor in the growth of the steel industry of the United States.

Ships carrying tons of iron ore, coal, stone and other bulk products navigate through the 63-mile long St. Marys River headed toward eastward ports. The locks afford ships the ability to negotiate the 21-foot drop between the level of Lake Superior and the level of Lakes Michigan and Huron at the St. Marys River rapids.

Ships transport an average 83 million tons of cargo a year through these locks with the most common product, iron ore, at an average of almost 50 million tons per year.

Many different types of vessels from around the world pass through this system during a year varying in size from small passenger vessels and workboats to large ships carrying nearly 70,000 tons of iron ore per load.

The entire Soo Locks system, which consists of the Poe Lock, MacArthur Lock, Davis Lock and Sabin Lock, falls in the Corps of Engineers, Detroit District's jurisdiction with immediate supervision by the Soo Area Engineer.

The Soo Locks remain one of the finest tourist attractions in the United States with about 600,000 visitors a year at the visitors' information center and overlook platform, also maintained by the Corps, open to the public from mid-May to November 1 each year.

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The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Detroit District civil works program encompasses 93,000 square miles area of the lower Great Lakes basin in Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ohio. The Corps operates and/or maintains 104 navigation structures in the basin. Its mission includes real estate transactions, flood control, regulatory activities, disaster response, and mobilization readiness.